

Can Afghanistan's Women Pilots Aim High?

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Social prejudice and limited facilities makes life tough for the handful of female students at the country's aviation academy.

In December 2016, one of the Afghan Air Force's (AAF) only two qualified female pilots sought asylum in the United States after years of receiving death threats.

Niloofer Rahmani, who got her wings in 2012, now hopes to eventually enlist in the American air force. She told the New York Times that "things are getting worse and worse [for women in Afghanistan]."

That leaves the AAF with only one female pilot: Safia Ferozi, who recently finished her basic training at Herat's Shindand military airbase.

Ferozi, whose husband is also a pilot, said that she was not deterred by the difficulties of her position.

"I provide ammunition to the security forces and take critically wounded soldiers to the capital," she said. "Flying an aircraft for 10 hours [a day] is not easy, but I do it to serve my people."

But the news of Rahmani's asylum claim has not proved encouraging for the five women currently studying at Kabul's Aviation Academy.

After completing years of rigorous training, they hope to become part of a tiny elite of female pilots and serve as examples of just what women can achieve in the new Afghanistan.

However, multiple cultural and social obstacles remain, not least the problem of studying alongside hundreds of men with very few facilities for women.

All the instructors at the academy are male, which is another barrier in a highly conservative society where gender segregation is standard.

Shamim Noori has been at the academy for the last eight months, and although happy with her progress, said that she and her fellow female students struggled in this male-orientated environment.

"I was very interested in studying at the aviation academy. Despite all the problems that this entailed, I chose this profession so that I can serve my people through my work. But the thing that has concerned and worried me the most is that we don't have any female instructors. Women can also teach as well as men."

There is also no separate accommodation or even changing rooms, meaning it is impossible for women to stay on-site.

Her fellow student, Zahra Nabizada, said that the lack of a dormitory for women was an enormous deterrent.

"Many people from different provinces would like to come to Kabul and become pilots, but due to the fact that there is no separate dormitory for girls, and also the problems with transportation, they cannot come and study here," she said. "That's why we are just five girls studying at the aviation academy and every day at four pm, we go back to our homes."

Abdul Raouf, one of the trainers, acknowledged that a lack of female instructors deterred women from applying.

In addition, the air force was not a good bet for most women, especially considering the obstacles they had to overcome to graduate from the academy.

"As well as the lack of facilities, there are few advantages for women studying at the aviation academy," he said. "A woman studies for four years to become a good pilot and if she then starts teaching at the aviation academy, she can not expect a salary of more than 25,000 Afghanis."

He noted the experience of a former female graduate who took a desk job rather than become a trainer.

"We have one female pilot who graduated from the aviation academy, but now she works in the gender section of the ministry. If the academy paid her a good wage and decent bonuses, she would have started teaching at the academy and it would have been great for the female students."

Attiquallah Amarkhel, a former commander of the Afghan Air Force, agreed that it was a combination of poor

amenities, low wages and widespread social prejudice had kept women out of the service.

“The central issues which have deterred women from working in Afghan Air Forces are lack of facilities for female pilots, the low salaries, and the misbehaviour and lack of respect from their colleagues,” he said.

Women enjoyed far better condition in the military during the 1970s and 1980s, he recalled.

“The air force provided female pilots with all the facilities they needed and they were even given homes and other bonuses and privileges,” he said.

MASSIVE INVESTMENT

The Aviation Academy in Kabul provides training in basic theory, with some scope for practical exercises at a military airfield in the Shindand district of Herat province. After a year all students must travel abroad to learn to complete their training.

The US has invested heavily in the Afghan Air Force since the fall of the Taleban in 2001, providing it with more than 3.7 billion US dollars. It currently has a fleet made up of more than 120 transport craft and warplanes.

But Nazifa Zaki, a retired army general who now serves as a lawmaker and sits on parliament’s national security committee, said that the role played by women had been neglected.

She said that female involvement in Afghanistan’s modern military infrastructure was vital.

“It takes great courage for a man or a woman to become a pilot,” she said. “A lot should have been done to improve the air forces, but nothing has been achieved. The international community helped and donated a great deal to the Afghan Air Forces, but they didn’t pay much attention to the role of women.”

The deputy ministry of defence spokesman Mohammad Radminsh insisted that the military had not given up on creating more equal opportunities for women.

He said, “The defence ministry of Afghanistan wants to create more opportunities and pave the way for the training of female pilots in the Afghan Air Force with the help and cooperation of the USA United States of America and Mission Resolute Support [the Nato-led undertaking that has kept over 13,000 troops in the country].”

In the meantime, Ferozi, Afghanistan’s only remaining female pilot, made it clear that she would continue flying, no matter how hard it is.

“I have to continue in my duty even though it needs a great deal of energy and patience,” she said, “but I am ready to make sacrifices because I work to serve my nation.”

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